

Listen

A Seeker's Resource for Spiritual Direction

A P R I L 2 0 1 2

V O L 6 : I S S U E 2

CULTIVATING COMPASSION

A young person, mid-twenties, whom I accompany as a soul-friend asked, "You're saying it's possible I'm good enough just the way I am? That's hard for me to believe. How come we never hear that message?" That conversation was two years ago during a telephone spiritual guidance exchange. I have not forgotten the question or my response.

Outer, external voices seek to influence and define our inner reality, informing us how we think and feel, what we expect and desire. We receive messages about how to appear through the way we dress and what we say, and even where our social action should—or shouldn't—be placed. Images, words, and encounters can come from the media, strangers, or people we share a home with. The truth is, most of these words do not ring with accuracy. No one can define our inner reality, our own lived experience. It is a form of abuse when this occurs—a stealing of another person's unique identity, personality, and a loss of the opportunity to validate dreams, hopes, fears, or life-given purpose and gifts.

Spiritual direction or spiritual guidance is a place and time to validate, explore, and discover the powerful human experience of connection, healing, and love.

That evening on the telephone I encouraged, "Perhaps you *are* good enough. Just like this, right now. You



Sandhill Crane — *Grus canadensis*

are, and I am. We all are. No matter the circumstance. Certainly we can always be better, and there is value in striving for more. But, today, right now, maybe you are good, enough." With this particular seeker, questions about God or the Sacred Other was not part of our conversation. A deep sense of judgment and abandonment had created an angry soul-wound. My role was to put skin on compassion and care.

A few days after the conversation, I recalled "Wild Geese" a favorite poem by Mary Oliver from *Dream Works* (1994). Her opening lines shocked me. I invite you to tumble Oliver's insight into your heart and body:

You do not have to be good. / You do not have to walk on your knees / for a hundred miles through the desert, / repenting. / You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves.

It is time to announce our place in the world, invite others in out of the cold to break bread, gather at our table, in our communities, at the workplace, in our schools, places of worship, and in our sacred circles. There is enough when we share with love. Let us love what we love, and love one another with welcoming presence. We all belong. This starting place is good, enough.

REFLECT

- Do I give myself permission to love what I love, feel what I feel?
- Who can I invite in out of the cold to join me at my table?
- What healing and hope can emerge through my heart of compassion and thanksgiving?
- Am I good, enough?
- Do I know when to say, "enough."

—Pegge Erkeneff

SEEDS OF INTEREST:

- Field Guide: The Lost Art of Listening
- Poetry: *Tightrope*
- Book Review: *God of Love: A Guide to the Heart of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*
- Global Resources
- Ask Owl

THE LOST ART OF LISTENING

Listening is becoming a lost art. The information age and the revolution in technology are a mixed blessing, bringing awareness of our global community, and giving us the tools to communicate with each other twenty-four hours a day. They have also influenced how we *learn to listen*. In years past, most people ate dinner together, where they learned the art of communication, including *listening*. We also had more silence in public spaces—a *time to listen*. Even television and movies had more silence in them—a time to *absorb and listen*. However, watching television today offers poor examples of listening: interruptions, shouting, and lack of attention to the speaker.

Many of us are seduced by multi-tasking, trying to do at least two things at once. The research by neuroscientists, psychologists, and management professors suggests that our brains function better if we stay focused on one thing at a time. Multi-tasking slows us down and greatly increases the chance of mistakes, according to Dr. David E. Mayer, a cognitive scientist at the University of Michigan, USA.

As a result several new syndromes are emerging. One is called Continuous Partial Attention (CPA), described as when a person continues to e-mail, text message, and blog, while purportedly listening to someone else. *Surfer's Voice* is another: talking or listening to someone on the telephone while continuing to surf the Internet, read e-mail, instant message, or text. Keyboard typing can be heard in the background. *Absent Presence* is another name for these syndromes. Ironically, constantly being accessible makes us inaccessible.

How do we restore the art of listening? To become a listening presence we need to prepare—not only to listen to others but also to listen to ourselves, and to that which is beyond words. Just as we take time to write, practice, and polish a speech, we need to take time to practice and prepare to listen. Three practices are essential elements of this discipline: cultivating silence, slowing down to reflect, and becoming present.

There is no listening without silence, and yet silence is often hard to come by in our society. It requires taking time to slow down and listen. It is similar to a farmer who allows the soil to be fallow for a time, plowing, yet not planting—only resting. Silence is how we nurture our capacity to listen.

Contemplative invitation: Take some time each day to practice being silent. There are all kinds of contemplative and meditative practices from which to choose, such as being at ease with silence, a practice that will transform your capacity to listen. You will find you have more space around you to hear those who are not like you or whose opinions you disagree with.

A simple practice: Stop, breathe deeply, and attend to the moment.

—Kay Lindahl lives in Long Beach, California, USA. She is the founder of The Listening Center, and co-founder of Women of Spirit and Faith. Author of *The Sacred Art of Listening*, *Practicing the Sacred Art of Listening* and *How Does God Listen* and co-editor of *Women, Spirituality and Transformative Leadership: Where Grace Meets Power*. Her e-mail address is TheListeningCenter@yahoo.com.

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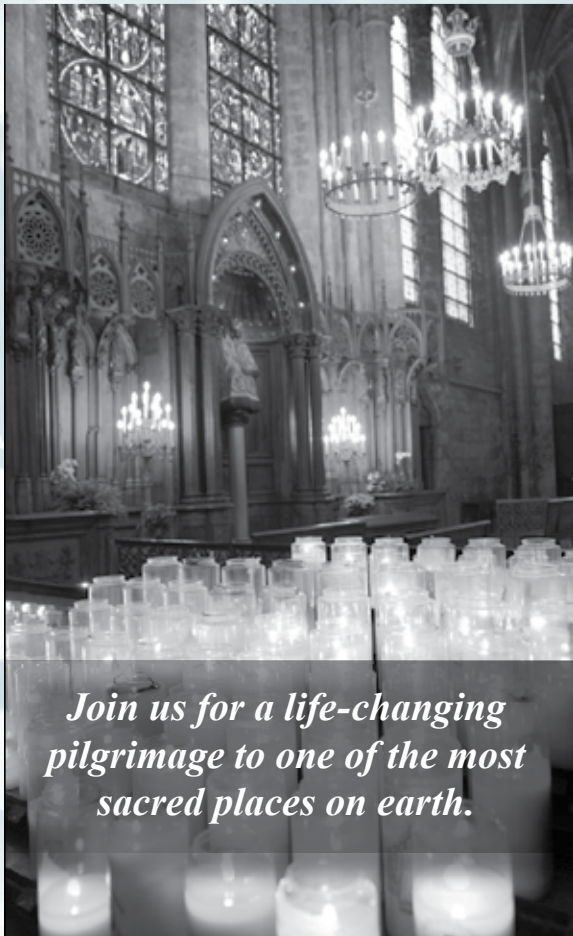
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Listen is an outreach publication of Spiritual Directors International. When you visit the SDI website at www.sdiworld.org, you can learn about retreats, programs, conferences, and other educational events related to spiritual companionship. You can read descriptions of the spiritual direction relationship from a variety of spiritual traditions,

and discover excellent questions to ask yourself and any potential spiritual directors you choose to interview. To locate a spiritual director or guide, go online to *Seek and Find: A Worldwide Resource Guide of Available Spiritual Directors*. More than 6,000 spiritual directors are listed by geographical location at www.sdiworld.org.



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Tightrope

When I let go, I didn't understand that letting go meant with both hands. So now I lay my palms up and open to the sky. A welcoming to that which will sift down from the clouds and fill me. Replace the aching hole with good enough. Which upon experience proves to be so much more.

A feast.

A feast that sticks like tender mortar into the cracks and wounds, heals the sad wail and gifts the soul with plenty.

Enough.

A feast.

A feast of Light and Spirit that threads through every cell and capillary to the point where all is whole, wanting for little and the little that is wanting is served with divinity as simple as putting one foot in front of the other and finding solidity where it was certain, just a moment ago, lay a gaping crevasse.

But I will not be swallowed. For there, instead, I find it.

Enough.

A feast.

Holding me in a sweet balance, the one I was searching for.

– Melissa Carta Miller [Pennsylvania, USA]

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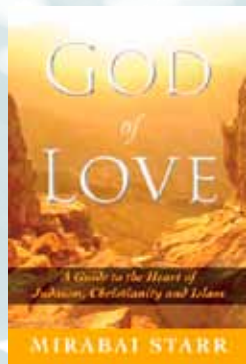
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Spiritual direction explores a deeper relationship with the spiritual aspect of being human. Simply put, spiritual direction is helping people tell their sacred stories everyday. Descriptions of a spiritual guidance relationship include *Anam Cara*, spiritual accompaniment,

spiritual companionship, spiritual direction, spiritual guidance, spiritual mentoring, sacred friendship, and soul friendship. How would you describe a relationship with another person—or group—that listens deeply to you, and receives *your* sacred life story?

REVIEW



God of Love: A Guide to the Heart of Judaism, Christianity and Islam
by Mirabai Starr

Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish Book Publishing, 2012
240 pages, CAD\$17.50, GBPE10.19, USD\$15.95
Reviewed by Tessa Bielecki

This book made me laugh and weep. It brought me to my knees in holy awe and led me into deep prayer. It challenged not only my thinking but my behaviors. *God of Love* pays homage to the mystical and social

justice teachings at the common core of the world's great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, focusing on what unifies rather than divides us.

Spiritual directors often grapple with the major themes presented here: faith and the "emptiness of unknowing," stewardship of the earth, mercy and forgiveness, welcoming the stranger, "smashing idols," loss and death, grief and woundedness, the "fire of global suffering," balancing contemplation and action, the feminine face of God.

Author Mirabai Starr addresses these themes in fresh contemporary language that makes her work accessible to men and women, young and old, ardent practitioners and even smirking skeptics. Each chapter begins with what has become Starr's signature: a compelling invocation that seduces us into the heart of the matter. The chapters then unfold with an overview of the theme from each tradition's perspective; a memoir which vividly describes Starr's personal engagement with the theme; and exemplars who embody the theme in their own lives in highly refined, rich, relevant, and uplifting ways.

We receive new insights into Abraham and the Prophets, Jesus and the Gospels, Hildegard of Bingham, Francis of Assisi, and other Christian mystics, the Baal Shem Tov,

Esther "Etty" Hillesum, who refused to demonize the Nazis who murdered her, Sister Josephine Bakhita from the Sudan, and the remarkable Ted Wiard from Taos, New Mexico, USA, who has suffered more losses than it seems possible any human being can bear.

It's good for us to learn more about the holy ones of Islam: Rabia Al-Adawiyya, the Sufi ecstatic from eighth-century Iraq; Khidr, whom Muslims call "The Green One;" Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhair, co-founder of the Jerusalem Peacemakers (with Israeli Eliyahu McClean), who suffered an untimely heart attack in 2010 after almost sixty years of celebrating the interconnectedness among the Children of Abraham. I found the author's treatment of Muhammad particularly sympathetic and inspiring.

Most importantly, this book points to the great need in our time for the interspiritual approach: sharing the mystic heart beating in the center of the world's deepest spiritual traditions. Starr is uniquely poised to embody this approach. Her eloquent afterword, "Walking the Interspiritual Path," gives us concrete suggestions for activating our own interspiritual quest.

Starr has a unique, vibrant, and deeply mystical voice. At long last we are hearing more of it after so many of her translations of the Christian mystics. It is refreshing to hear her name the *fit of iconoclasm* that has made us reject so much good from the monotheistic traditions and ultimately left us spiritually bankrupt. Starr recommends a more realistic approach: "In spite of the undeniable history of abuses committed in the name of religion, the monotheistic faiths offer innumerable points of access to the realm of love," a "song" which all three traditions sing "in a deliciously different voice," welcoming everyone to the table. 🍀

—Tessa Bielecki has been a spiritual guide for over forty years, formerly as Mother Abbess of the Spiritual Life Institute, and currently as co-director of the Desert Foundation based in Colorado, USA. Author of several books, at Sounds True you can find her six CD program, *Wild at Heart: Radical Teachings of the Christian Mystics*. She lives as a hermit in Crestone, Colorado, and her contact is Tessa@DesertFound.org.



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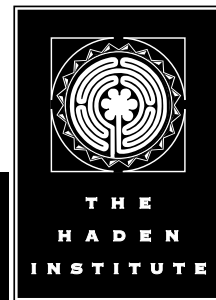
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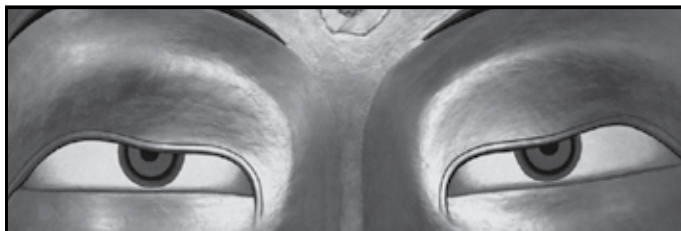
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ASK OWL



Question: How do I know when it is time to seek a new spiritual director? I'm afraid of offending my current spiritual guide, whom I care about. Yet, I have been experiencing a restlessness for

several months. I do not eagerly anticipate our meeting times, and I yearn for something other than what I am experiencing now. We've been together for several years. I don't know what to do.

Hoot Hoot: What a dilemma. Your spiritual director has companioned you for a long time, and in all likelihood, has listened to you well, and tenderly holds you and your story. He or she prays for you and has at one time been a person you eagerly anticipated meeting. (This is evident because you wrote that you no longer experience eager anticipation when you meet.) The crux or rub is a lack of freedom to engage a difficult conversation.

First off, it is the responsibility of a good spiritual guide to regularly provide a time to check in about how things are unfolding and growing. Even if you have met for years, this should still be in place. Because it isn't, you may need to

take the initiative when a session ends to take a deep breath and say, "Next time I would like to take part of our time to evaluate where you are, and where I am in the meeting time." Leave it as simple as this. No additional explanation is necessary. Spend time reflecting about how it could be life-giving to stay, and what is life-giving to pursue with something or someone different. It could be that your life circumstances have changed, you need more challenge, or your interests and spiritual practice would benefit from a different spiritual guide. On the other hand, perhaps there is a gift in your spiritual guide knowing you and your story over a long period of time, and a surprise insight might be revealed in the difficult conversation.

Trust the process. Notice your inner promptings and sensations in your body. Pay attention to other events transpiring in your life. Give yourself permission to feel what you feel, and then be brave—share your experience and wrestling questions with your spiritual director. Spiritual direction is a safe place to speak truth. If it is not, it is not a healthy relationship, and indeed, it might be time to seek a new spiritual companion. Peace in your journey.

—If you have a question for Owl, please e-mail Listen@sdiworld.org.



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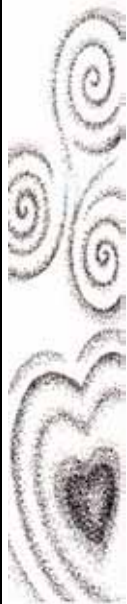


APRIL 2012 VOL 6: ISSUE 2

"Tending the holy around the world and across traditions ...

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—Translated by Marta Rios and Xavier Ortiz Monasterio



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